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# **The effects of discourse and local organizing practices on disabled academics' identities**

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## **Stream 29: Identities and Critical Management Studies:**

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## **Abstract**

By drawing on data relating to disabled academics' experiences of local organizing practices, this paper addresses the call relating to *problematizing* and *politicising identities*. The paper explores local organizing practices and their relationship to the regulation of identities by examining discourses of disability and ableism, and their effects on the organizing and marginalizing of disability and disabled people. As disabled people are an under-theorized and under-represented research group within organization studies, this paper makes an empirical contribution. Furthermore, it makes a theoretical contribution by fusing together the productive lenses of identity and disability studies to develop a conceptual framework for theorizing disabled academics' experiences and identities. By applying a disability studies lens developed by Williams and Mavin (under review), we identify some of the discourses which contribute to identity regulation in disabled academics' organizing contexts and the ways in which disabled academics position themselves to respond and resist the regulatory effects of dominant discourses.

# **The effects of discourse and local organizing practices on disabled academics' identities**

## **Introduction and relationship to call**

The paper explores local organizing practices and their relationship to the regulation of identities by examining discourses of disability and ableism, and their effects on the organizing and marginalizing of disability and disabled people. In the paper we fuse together the productive lenses of identity and disability studies to develop a conceptual framework for theorizing disabled academics' experiences and identities. By applying a disability studies lens developed by Williams and Mavin (under review), we identify some of the discourses which contribute to identity regulation in disabled academics' organizing contexts and the ways in which disabled academics position themselves to respond and resist the regulatory effects of dominant discourses.

## **The role of discourse in shaping constructions of disability and the disability studies lens**

The field of disability studies argues an individual interpretation discourse of disability has dominated knowledge construction on what it means to be a disabled person. Disability is constructed as an individual deficit (Oliver, 1983) or a personal tragedy (Oliver, 1996) of biological or functional limitations, which require medical intervention or rehabilitation (French, 2001) for disabled people to fit normative, non-disability organizing processes and practices. Naming this the individual interpretation discourse, the disability studies field challenged this individualized construction and repositioned disability through a socio-political orientation. Through this orientation, disability is redefined as the outcome of people with impairments' self-identification as a disabled person and their experiences of externally imposed barriers (Oliver, 1996). Impairment is therefore a prerequisite for a disability identity. However impairment is predominantly excluded from early theorizations and research, remaining conceptualized as a biological characteristic (Hughes, 2002).

Subsequent disability studies theorization of disability has problematized this bifurcation, arguing impairment should be considered less of a biological given and more as "both an experience and a discursive construction" (Hughes and Patterson, 1997:329) as impairment imbricates (Campbell, 2009) disabled people's experiences (Hughes, 2007) and relationships (Scott-Hill, 2004). This brings impairment into a research frame to enable a concern for the effects of discourse for experiences of impairment, disability and organizing processes and practices.

An additional focus in the disability studies literature is upon anti-discrimination legislation, perceived to be an important step in achieving civil rights for disabled people (Barnes, 1992; Hurst, 2004), and a point of focus for the activism of the UK-based disabled people's movement (DPM) (Corker, 2000; Oliver, 1996; Thornton and Lunt, 1997). Since the enactment of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995, successive legislative changes have sought to improve disabled people's access to and progression in work organizations, primarily around core features of the legislation, namely; protection from discrimination and harassment, reasonable adjustments to work practices, and the provision of assistive technology.

Woodhams and Corby (2007:561) note the DDA 1995 is “based on an individual rights approach, which emphasizes equality of treatment, consistency and procedural justice”. Therefore, it may be reasonable for disabled people to draw upon a legislative discourse when assessing managerial responses. However, the legislative framework contains the option to perceive requests for adjustments as outside the scope of the legislation, that is to justify refusing a request (Dickens, 2007; Woodhams and Corby, 2007) as unreasonable.

Returning to the discussion on the theorization of disability and impairment, and to bring it into the organization studies field, Williams and Mavin (under review) develop a theoretical lens which coalesces disability and impairment. They adopt Thomas’ (1999, 2004, 2007) impairment effects concept, but refocus it from her material and psycho-emotional emphasis, to move beyond assumed oppression, and argue for an engagement with disabled people’s agency alongside an emphasis on both “bodily (or cognitive) variation and the social context” (Williams and Mavin, under review:23). Taken forward this supports an exploration of how disabled people “account for the effects of impairment within their experiences, and what they require and expect of the organizing contexts they encounter; appreciating that disabled people may seek to accommodate or negate impairment effects” (Williams and Mavin:24 under review).

The lens also connects with a growing theme in the disability studies literature around ableism, to explore how the “naturalized universal and neutral status of non-disability ... remains invisible and disconnected from constructions of disability” (Williams and Mavin, under review). That is, the lens includes a concern for how discourses infused with ableism (Campbell, 2009; Chouinard, 1997; Harlan and Robert, 1998; Hearn and Parkin, 1993; Hughes, 1999, 2007; Morris, 1993; Shakespeare, 1994) construct disability and disabled people as ‘Other’ and negated difference (Overboe, 1999) to normative expectations of non-disability.

This disability studies lens recognizes disabled people can offer insights to the experience of disability without suggesting “some kind of epistemic privilege” as a social group to be privileged over others (Campbell, 2009b:121). Rather this paper recognizes researching disabled peoples’ experiences “cultivates...inferential insight[s] into the dynamics of [disability and] ableism in a way that is *distinct* from those whose lives are not infused with impairment” (Campbell, 2009b:121 emphasis in original).

In summary, this paper applies a disability studies lens developed by Williams and Mavin (under review). The lens (figure 1) draws upon the disability studies literature to critique the dominant individual discourse of disability (Corker, 2000; Oliver 1983, 1990) and offers a social interpretation. The lens focuses upon the construction of social relations and conceptualizations of disability and non-disability which become established over time as transparent normative expectations (Foucault 1978) and emphasizes the role of discourse in reproducing and maintaining such understandings (Abberley, 2002; Corker, 1998, 1999a/b; Corker and French, 1999; Goodley, 2004).

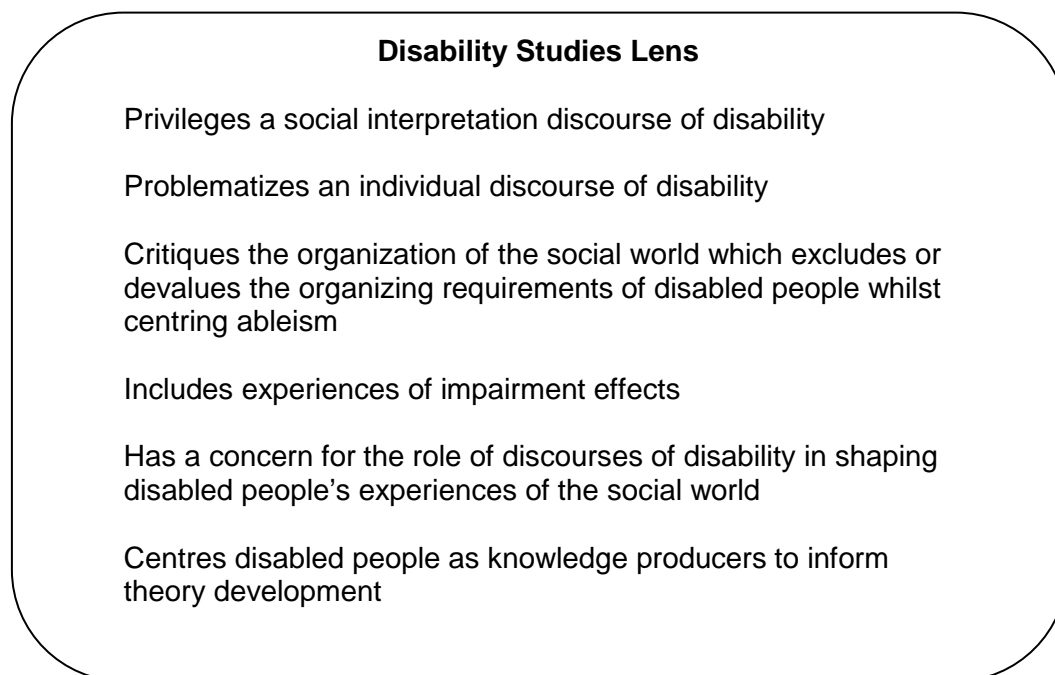


Figure 1 *Disability studies lens*

Source: Williams and Mavin, under review

### **Synthesizing disability studies and identity studies lenses**

In terms of identity, Williams (2010) has highlighted disability studies critiques of broader literatures which place an emphasis upon the traits, characteristics, and spoiled identities (Barnes, 2004; Thanem, 2008) of disabled people. Whilst disability studies literature exploring identity is limited (Ewens and Williams, forthcoming), the dominant approach is around the affirmative model (Swain and French, 2000) extended by Cameron (2008, 2010). Generated by disabled people for disabled people, the affirmative model directly challenges the dominant personal tragedy model of disability and impairment and asserts a positive, valued and distinctive social identity (Campbell and Oliver, 1996) which celebrates difference (Swain and French, 2000, 2008). As part of the broader disabled people's movement representing the oppression of people with impairments in a disabling society, the affirmation of a disabled identity is a continuing process (Swain and French, 2000; 2008) which is constantly being "reworked or 'retold'" (Barnes and Mercer, 2003, cited by Swain and French, 2008:76).

### **Identity work, positioning theory and negated difference**

To extend the limited focus in disability studies, the disability studies lens is synthesized with identity work theory (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008) and specifically positioning theory (Harré and van Langehove, 1991, 1999; van Langehove and Harré, 1999; Davies and Harré, 1990, 1999). Like the disability studies lens, both theories acknowledge the importance of discourse. By discourse, we refer both to "broader, historically derived collective patterns of belief and legitimacy" (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 636) and their underlying power relations and structures (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004; de Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg, 2006), as discussed above, and the dialogic process of self-

identity construction (Beech, 2008). In regarding individuals as “simultaneously produced by discourse and manipulators of it” (Burr, 2003: 113), positioning recognizes, on the one hand, the socio-cultural force of dominant discourses in positioning individuals and, on the other, an individual's agency in using language and discursive resources for self-positioning (Harré and van Langenhove, 1991; van Langenhove and Harré, 1999). Therefore, broader societal discursive practices are both a means of authoring self and a medium of social control and power (Brown and Coupland, 2005).

The power effect (Brown, 2001; Alvesson *et al.*, 2008) on self-identity of dominant societal discourses or “meta-narrative discursive structuring” (Ybema *et al.*, 2009: 308) is refracted in the “ideas and norms about the “natural” way of doing things” (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002: 631) within organizational contexts. Following Alvesson and Willmott's (2002:621) understanding of the interplay of identity work and “mechanisms and practices of control”, organizational practices may be a form of “normative organizational control” (p.621) with “more or less intentional effects” (p.625) in constructing and regulating organizational members' identities. We propose that the societal discourses of disability and impairment, including the dominant, personal tragedy/individual interpretation, which is “ingrained” in the social identity of non-disabled people (Swain and French, 2000: 578), are refracted in organizing processes and practices. Through positioning theory, we will explore how this and other discourses and related subject positions locate individuals within a “structure of rights and duties” (Davies & Harré, 1999:35) with attendant identity and power implications (Burr, 2003: 117).

Ybema *et al.*, (2009:299) propose that the “agency-structure issue” is discursively reflected in self-other talk and, particularly, the articulation of “sameness” and “otherness”. They elaborate:

whether in the normative prescriptions of organizational discourse, wider socio-cultural scripts or actors' definitions of themselves and others..., ‘sameness’ and ‘otherness’ emerge as pivotal guidelines in the elaboration of... identity (Ybema *et al.*, 2009:306-7).

The discursive separation of ‘self’ from the ‘other’ (Ybema *et al.*, 2009: 306) is enacted in social interaction by claiming, offering, accepting or resisting (Burr, 2003) subject positions made available by discourse (Hollway, 1984). Many identity work studies (for example, Watson, 2009; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008) emphasize how individuals strive to maintain a distinctive and favourable self-identity. Ybema *et al.*, (2009; 312) suggest that research highlighting the “antagonism, alienation and self-depreciation which also fuel the identity-formation process” is less common place. We propose that the self-other differentiations relating to disabled and non-disabled people, embedded in societal and organizational discourses and enacted through local and mundane organizational practices, set up a “local moral order” (Harré, 1998, pp.18) and “position the other not merely as different, but also as less acceptable, less respectable” (Ybema *et al.*, 2009: 307).

The concern for how disabled people are “constructed as negatively different” (Chouinard, 1999:143) through the constituting effects of ableism (the normative assumptions of non-disability) is already recognised within the disability studies literature but is not yet fully acknowledged within the organization studies or identity literatures. Our study contributes to these literatures by illustrating how the individual interpretation and legislative discourses construct, reproduce and maintain (Carabine, 2001; Simpson and Lewis, 2005, 2007) ableism as a normative

expectation (Campbell, 2009b; Chouinard, 1997; Harlan and Robert, 1998; Hearn and Parkin, 1993; Hughes, 1999, 2007; Morris, 1993; Shakespeare, 1994) of disabled academics in their organizing contexts. These discourses contribute to affirming non-disability as normality (Campbell, 2009b; Chouinard, 1997; Corker, 2000; Corker and Shakespeare, 2002; Foster, 2007; Harlan and Robert, 1998; Hughes, 2007; Oliver, 1983, 1990; Woodhams and Corby, 2003). Furthermore, this discourse of normality and the 'normal' way of things (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Campbell, 2005, Hughes, 2007) contributes to the construction of disabled academics identities as the 'negatively different' 'Other'.

The fusing of the disability studies lens and identity work and positioning theories, thus, offers the potential for three potential theoretical contributions: first, to theorize the discourses and discursive resources disabled academics draw on in their accounts of local organizing practices; second, to identify the effect of discourses and local organizing practices in shaping disabled academics' identities; and, third, to highlight ways in which disabled academics accommodate, reject and resist organisational efforts of subject positioning and identity regulation.

### **Design/methodology/approach**

This paper draws on a constructionist understanding of the social world (Burr, 2003) and acknowledges that we come to understand ourselves and to construct knowledge through interacting and relating with others (Crotty, 1998; Hosking, 1999; Hosking and Morley, 1991; Cunliffe, 2008). Through processes of relating (Hosking, 1999; Hosking and Morley, 1991) and dialogue (Cunliffe, 2008; Beech, 2008), people and organizations are always in the process of making meaning, constructing knowledge, and constituting selves and others. This view recognizes that processes of relating are "power infused" (Cunliffe, 2008:128) in which some and not others are privileged. Rather than reflecting reality, such an understanding holds discourse as constitutive and central (Hosking, 1999) to "giving form to reality" (Cunliffe, 2001:352), bringing people and things into being (Hosking, 1999).

Eight disabled academics' experiences of local organizing practices are interpreted through a narrative inquiry. Participants were contacted through higher education networks, trade union contacts, and contacts across the sector. Interviews were semi-structured to generate disabled academics' accounts of work experiences. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with the exclusion of paralinguistics (Elliott, 2005). All participants were offered the opportunity to reflexively review their interview transcript, and three participants reflexively reviewed the authors' interpretations resonated with their experiences (Charmaz, 2000; Ellis and Bochner, 2000).

We understand narrative as a mutually-constitutive social process through which people "make sense of experience" (Chase, 1995:5), and "communicate meaning" (Chase, 1995:7), within contexts shaped by particular discourses. We interpreted the disabled academics' narrative accounts using Mauthner and Doucet's (1998) voice-centred relational method. Whilst applying all four readings, for this paper, focussed attention on the second reading (for the voice of the 'I') and reading 3 (for relationships with others) as this was particularly pertinent to our understanding of self-other identity work. As the regulatory effect of organizing practices began to emerge from the data interpretation, we gave attention, through reading 4, to constructions of political contexts and social structures. For instance, we looked for use of moral terms such as 'should', 'ought', as indications of social norms and



values (Mauthner and Doucet, 1998: 133) and expectations of social context rights and obligations.

Our data analysis method was also consonant with positioning theory that, during social interaction, an individual 'positions oneself' in relation to other people, 'takes up positions' made available by discourse (Hollway, 1984) and engages in "ever-shifting patterns of mutual and contestable rights and obligations of speaking and acting" (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999:1). To aid interpretation by the reader of the participants' narratives and our interpretations of them in relation to positioning theory, we use the following notation: *deliberate positioning of self or other(s)* is indicated in italics, **forced positioning of self or other(s)** in bold, and social context rights and obligations are underlined.

## Findings

The findings focus on mundane organizing processes and practices, such as negotiating for the provision of suitable office equipment, moving teaching materials around campus, taking breaks and arranging meetings. The illustrations and our discussion surface some of the dominant discourses contributing to the organizing of disability and offer identity-related insights. The narrative extracts illustrate the effects of local organizing practices and discourses in claiming, refuting and/or resisting a disability identity. The findings highlight the self-identity struggles, for instance of challenging or conceding to working processes and practices premised upon non-disability norms.

The negotiation, agreement and implementation of adjustments to work remits are a source of tension for disabled people (Foster, 2007; Harlan and Robert, 1998). Rather than being able to rely upon organizational policies and practices or participate in systems already established as part of how higher education is 'organized', participants' experiences overall describe attempts to negotiate organizations in the absence of what are perceived as an appropriate managerial and/or organizational response. The narratives emphasize the importance of the approach adopted by line management and the inclusion (or otherwise) of impairment effects in organizing processes.

For **Jonathan**, impairment effects mean taking care over lifting or carrying heavy objects, and not becoming over involved in work related physical activities. Jonathan experienced a lack of consideration of the physical aspects of his teaching role which, combined with poor management of access facilities, created difficulties in one university. Large group teaching required Jonathan to move large amounts of teaching materials, something he could not physically do. Jonathan was treated like everybody else, with an assumption of a particular level of physicality and with the expectation of working in the same way as other academics without impairment.

Jonathan was able to circumvent the consequences of this expectation, partially, by negotiating informally with colleagues and students to assist in carrying, loading and unloading materials from his car. However, this was not always successful, due to the limited provision and poor management of accessible parking on campus

I think there was one marked disability space, but it was not always free. Sometimes it was a delivery van, sometimes there was another disabled person, sometimes there was somebody who shouldn't have parked there.

In another organization, Jonathan had similar experiences regarding the installation and movement of office equipment, and the provision of suitable seating. He described the experience as a battle, in which he needed to argue for suitable provision

A lot of the things around **we've had to battle for**, like, you know, who moves the desks, who moves the books, who you know installs the computer so a lot of that time **I've had to ask for help**. Help hasn't been offered, nobody [took responsibility], I said 'look I need an adapted chair', not an adapted chair but a more comfortable chair to support [impairment] and they stumped up that.... but in a way I'm personally quite friendly with the guy who's in charge so you know he did the decent thing, **but I had to argue for it... I've always had to say** wherever I've been, **actually this is not what I should have been doing**.

At times Jonathan felt uncomfortable in asserting himself and asking for organizational responses to his impairment related requirements.

And I think **I felt sometimes, not a cad but a bit of a**, I don't think *I've always been able to assert my physical needs as it were*. Or rather, it's not that I've not been able to but it's, **I've had to, I have had to assert them**.

Like Jonathan, **Gina** had to be assertive in negotiating for the provision of some critical workstation equipment. Gina's knowledge of her requirements was not taken into account and she was excluded from the decision-making process, making her feel isolated and disempowered.

They weren't even willing to talk to me about it and it was all being done for me. ... When I first talked about the chair... there was no willingness to listen, to listen at all. In fact most of the communications between the people who organize the equipment and me had to go through my line manager they would not talk to me direct no one asked me.

Gina experienced a twelve week delay in the provision of some critical equipment, and found it necessary to repeatedly contact her line manager

I should think you're looking in double/treble figures at the emails I had to send to get anything to happen and so **you then become your own worst enemy** you know.

As her impairment effects were invisible, Gina felt colleagues were making incorrect assumptions about their real impact, and also perceived her as a 'moaner'

**Everybody sees you as the moaner** and of course [impairment] are not visible...and therefore **people will think you're making a lot of fuss about nothing** and so on and one has comments such as "well it's not as if you're in a wheelchair" you know as if that would be the only permissible physical disability that would be acceptable.

Colleagues perceived negatively Gina's refusal to wait passively for assistive technology and other vital workstation equipment to arrive (after a delay of over twelve weeks for some items)

I mean I was certainly told by various people "I don't think I should make such a big thing of it" as if you have a choice you know, as if you could say well really this is an optional extra having this desk I'll not bother this time because it is clearly upsetting people. I mean one only wants the adjustments in order to be able to do the job.

Gina's requests and attempts to change organizational processes to accommodate her requirements were overall met with resistance, and the responses she received were such that they reinforced perceptions of negated difference. She summarized the impact of this upon how she perceived her position

Being in the organisation now to summarize means that **you are forced into an adversarial position which is very uncomfortable**

**Holly's** impairment effects have developed and increased in impact over a number of years. She took great care to manage her impairment effects and, to allow her to do so, aimed to secure adjustments to her work remit. Over time, and in her current context, Holly developed an acceptable working pattern which involved changes from large group or long teaching sessions to small group teaching and activities such as marking student work and postgraduate supervisions. The aim was to balance and pace activities to enable Holly to use time between teaching or other face-to-face activities to rest. However, Holly drew attention to the difficulties she experienced with colleagues because of the ways in which she managed her impairment effects. Holly explained how she used non-contact or teaching time to rest. A senior colleague began to relay other colleagues' responses to how Holly managed in this way

(He) said "well everyone thinks **you're really anti-social**" and I said "*I don't care what everyone thinks quite frankly I'm on a survival course here and if the only way I can manage my work is to come in and be in my office and be quiet and just go to classes I need to go to and then come back to the office, then I'll do that*"...my head of section kept saying to me "**everyone thinks you're anti-social**" and I said "*tough, nothing I can do about it*".

Holly risked damaged relationships with colleagues by resisting their non-acceptance of her way of organizing to keep herself well. Her approach to self-care resonates with the recognition within the disability studies and work literature that work arrangements, when non-inclusive, can have a negative impact upon well-being (French, 2001; Lonsdale, 1990). As self-care has historically taken place outside the public gaze (Barnes and Mercer, 2005) Holly was resisted when she attempted to bring it into the workplace.

**Catherine's** narrative overall suggests she had chosen an approach which reflected normative expectations and which made her impairment effects invisible. Yet, when she discussed her interactions with managers, Catherine suggested some ambivalence to this approach as there were potentially negative outcomes

I have found that when I mention that my manager has taken that on board and seems to take it seriously so, I think if I make my needs known then people will at least be prepared to listen to those. That is my perception. But there certainly is no particular attention to any of my

perhaps special needs before I would have expressed them, and that's, *I'm probably quite alright with that that's how I've worked all my life.*

Catherine went on to suggest that, were there to be a more proactive approach adopted within her organization, she may have felt more comfortable in surfacing her requirements

I don't know if whether sometimes if there was more of a recognition that I might have different needs that I would be more, *I would come forward with my needs more easily*, probably that is the case.

When consideration of requirements is by request, rather than an integral aspect of organizing, managers may fail to consider or manage the impairment related implications of changes to organizational contexts. Managers may assume disabled academics fit in with established organizing processes which assume non-impairment, and therefore respond negatively to any request for alternative arrangements. Catherine reflected upon her current organizing context noting a general lack of proactively managing disability related support. Catherine highlighted a problem when she requested a particular workstation arrangement, and experienced misperceptions of the fairness of meeting her requirements from her line manager

There was this discussion about 'well you know it has to be equitable and I can't give you something that I can't give another member of staff' and I thought 'oh, right. Interesting'.

The response suggests the request was perceived to fall outside normative expectations, and even outside of any DDA legislative imperative to consider 'reasonable adjustments'.

Whilst Catherine may benefit from a similar provision in teaching rooms, she was then reluctant to make a request, anticipating problems with senior management

I haven't tried making any approaches in terms of something to perch on or something like that, but *I think they would be surprised* and I would anticipate that there might be problems to start with.

In Catherine's organizational context, the adoption of an approach which negates the visibility of impairment effects can be seen to be, at least partially, a strategic one (Roulstone et al., 2003): to prevent organizational processes from making Catherine more visible as requiring different provision, and as a form of self protection. Whilst Catherine may be perceived to have preferred a low-key approach, which made impairment effects related ways of organizing invisible, this may have been mitigated if practices and processes were to include disabled people's requirements as legitimate (Deegan, 2000).

Similar to Catherine's experiences, **Sophia** highlighted the extent of her employer's lack of knowledge, understanding or implementation of the legislative framework on disability. This led to her losing her post doc position rather than adjustments being made or re-deployment being considered

This was 1998 nobody even mentioned it (DDA 1995) to me I probably knew of it vaguely but there was no assessment made of adaptations to

my work, there was no suggestion that I could continue to work with that lab.

This may indicate an orientation to an individualized understanding of disability (Foster, 2007). Where processes are not managed and managers abdicate responsibility for developing inclusive organizing processes and practices, disabled academics feel unsupported. Rather than perceiving the context in which the work role has developed as non-inclusive of the different requirements of academics with impairments, disabled academics may be perceived to be lacking the ability to meet the requirements of the work role.

A lack of formal management of disability is similarly reflected in **Abigail's** narrative. Abigail returned to work after a period of absence related to impairment effects, and adjustments to her work remit (particularly teaching) were managed informally with colleagues and friends within her school, reflecting colleagues' concern to offer support

The Head of section...who is not official line management, ...he took on more responsibility. But again, it was the case of an individual taking on more work to try and cut me slack in that respect...rather than an official kind of bringing my allocation down. It was more a case of working it out with the individual that I actually did work with on a day-to-day basis.

However, after seven years of negotiating with colleagues who continued to informally adjust work remits with her at times when impairment effects were significant, Abigail began to question the appropriateness of this approach. This was heightened by changes to the structure of her School

As things shift upwards into the School structure much more formally, I think there has to be a response at the School level and *I think work/life balance has been thrown into a lot sharper focus for me...because I have been working with the equal opportunities in the union*, so that's all kinds of issues and it includes disability.

**Samuel** acquired a mobility impairment after an employment-related accident whilst an academic, and subsequently became involved in committee and other activities to develop inclusive practices. However, Samuel recognized the need to take care in how he was involved, to reduce his visibility as an activist, and feared being removed for being too critical of his institution's practices

*I have to be extremely careful because I think **there are a lot of people who would like to throw me off the committee** because I'm viewed as trouble* you see. You see what I mean, *if you push too hard you have to be extremely careful of your role because if you push too hard you will be thrown off.*

The extent to which Samuel took an active role in his organization, to drive forward the changes needed, was influenced by his perception of the lack of effort on the part of the university's central administration, and the extent to which he felt his experience of waiting for change to be initiated by his university had not served him well. Samuel told of a time when a Registrar organized a disability committee meeting in an inaccessible room, noting their response was not to re-arrange it

It was left, oh yes, he had no intention of moving it 'oh we can't find another room, oh we can't find another room'

Samuel suggests that in response to this he takes action

But they know I'm coming (to meetings etc) they can't realise that they have to actually... well in fact that is partially why I send emails saying 'in an accessible room' and it's partially also why *I've been driving what [Disability Adviser] is doing currently* which is making up the database to improve access because the current room booking system doesn't discriminate between accessible and inaccessible rooms.

Samuel's approach can be perceived, as Hanson (2007) suggests, as subversive. The intent is to bring about unsponsored change by engaging in activities which fall under the remit of service to the university, an integral aspect of many academic careers. However, as Samuel notes above, this is not without risk.

## **Discussion**

As Chia (2000:513) notes, discourses constitute organizations through stabilizing and ordering meanings, as "it is through [the]...process of differentiating, fixing, naming, labelling, classifying and relating – all intrinsic processes of discursive organization – that social reality is systematically constructed". This reflects our understanding that discourses constitute what are recognized as appropriate and legitimate (Carabine, 2001) ways of organizing. Therefore, to strengthen the insights from this study we draw attention to the constructive role of discourse (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Carabine, 2001; Chia, 2000; Simpson and Lewis, 2005, 2007) in shaping the disabled academics' narrative accounts, and in shaping their selves. We highlight how broad social discourses "act as a resource and a constraint" (Hardy and Phillips, 1999:2) within organizing contexts "form[ing] the contours of contexts guiding the development of local resources" (Kuhn, 2006:1342) for people seeking to "shape their institutional contexts" and if desired enable "different conditions of possibility" (Maguire and Hardy, 2006:23. See also Weedon, 1997). Therefore, we discuss how the discourses work to construct, reproduce and maintain processes that marginalize disability and impairment effects related ways of organizing and highlight ways in which disabled academics draw on discourses in an attempt to resist such marginal positioning.

### **Social interpretation discourse**

The social interpretation discourse redefines the 'problem' of disability through refocusing attention from a disabled person's impairment as inherently problematic and the cause of social marginalization, to re-inscribe disability as "a problem of social organization" (Hughes, 2002:73). This approach critiques the organization of society and work (Oliver, 1983) which do not include or acknowledge the legitimacy of the organizing requirements of people with impairments (Deegan, 2000; Gray, 2009; Harlan and Robert, 1998, Overboe, 1999). The social interpretation discourse emerges as a discursive resource drawn upon within the disabled academics' accounts as they identify some organizing processes and practices as positive, in being orientated towards and including their requirements of working with impairment effects, and as they critique organizing processes and practices which exclude such requirements.

An example of how disabled academics draw upon a social interpretation discourse is **Catherine's** rejection of language which categorized her requirements in the realm of individualism. Catherine narrated an ambiguous questioning of the appropriateness of considering her access requirements as "needs", "different needs" and "perhaps special needs", which reflects Corker's (1998) suggestion that the social interpretation conceptualises special needs language as drawing upon an individualisation of disability.

Engaging in university disability equality activities to bring about institutional change both for themselves and other disabled staff can also be interpreted as reflecting the social interpretation discourse. **Samuel** stressed how he had "been driving what [Disability Adviser] is doing currently which is making up the database to improve access". He sought change to the room booking system to ensure accessible rooms are booked after experiencing resistance and being excluded from meetings due to the organizing practices within his university. In other words, he challenged the normative expectations he experienced within his organizing context and maintained the expectations that the organizing processes and practices should change to accommodate and accept the legitimacy (Deegan, 2000; Gray, 2009; Harlan and Robert, 1998; Overboe, 1999) of disabled academics' impairment effects related requirements.

The social interpretation discourse acts as a resource for recognizing, naming and countering (Abberley, 2002; Corker and French, 1999) a dominant individual interpretation discourse (Corker, 2000; Oliver 1983, 1990) within organizing contexts. By drawing upon the social interpretation discourse, the disabled academics refute the individualization of disability, by surfacing and challenging as problematic organizational processes and practices, the responses they receive, and language used about disabled people. The social interpretation discourse can be understood as establishing "discursive space" (Weedon, 1997:107) and enabling disabled academics to construct "alternative forms of knowledge" (Weedon (1997:108). This alternative knowledge challenges the transparency of non-disability norms and contests the exclusion of the legitimacy of impairment effects related ways of working. We return to this type of discursive practice as a form of resistance below.

### **Individual interpretation discourse**

An important role of the social interpretation discourse is that it conceptualizes and names the individual interpretation (Oliver, 1983; Corker, 1998) discourse. The individual interpretation discourse locates the nature of any difficulties meeting organizational requirements as the 'problem' of the disabled academic due to their biological or functional limitations (Oliver, 1983, 1990) rather than requiring a social response (Oliver, 2009; Swain *et al.*, 2003; Thomas, 2007), or as an outcome of the assumptions informing organizing processes and practices (Hughes, 2002). This individualization thus validates non-disability as normality (Campbell, 2009; French, 2001; Hughes, 2007; Oliver, 2009) and, by assuming disability "to be logically separate from and inferior to 'normalcy'" (Corker and Shakespeare, 2002:2), positions disabled academics as 'Other' (Hughes, 1999, 2007; Shakespeare, 1994) within their organizing contexts.

As the disabled academics narrated their organizational experiences, they often critiqued the lack of policies and procedures which included the access requirements of disabled staff, or poor implementation of organizational policies, and interpreted these as examples of the individual interpretation discourse. **Jonathan** highlighted how even when there was, for example, a policy on accessible parking, it was not enforced which left him to struggle with mobility across campus. The failure to

operationalize policies that exist can be understood as regarding such policies as empty shells, which lack any value (Hoque and Noon, 2004) to effect the practices the disabled academics require to undertake their work.

The individual interpretation discourse can be interpreted as shaping responses to disabled academics' requirements and interacting with others in their organizing contexts. For example **Holly's** colleagues refused to accept the legitimacy of her using breaks as a means of managing impairment effects, interpreting this as anti-social, unacceptable, and outside the realms of 'normal' behaviour, rather than something which could be acknowledged as a legitimate response to impairment effects. Similarly, **Samuel's** interpretation of a member of staff's refusal to include his mobility related requirements when booking committee rooms is interpreted as reinforcing the perception that his mobility requirements were his individual problem and not the concern of his colleague or how meetings are expected to be organized within the University.

Further interpretations of the individual interpretation discourse are seen in the privileging of a medical assessment following **Gina's** request for a particular chair and desk arrangement. Gina's narrative highlights her feelings of marginalization when the opinion of external experts was privileged over her own expertise in understanding which assistive technologies were suitable for their requirements.

To summarise, rather than invoking a socially inclusive (Thomas, 2007) response, the negative responses to ways of working, the medicalized responses received and the lack of policies or procedures for disabled academics to rely upon suggest an individualized (Oliver, 1990) understanding of disabled academics' organizing requirements, and an expectation that disabled academics should manage these themselves. This positioned disabled academics requirements, perceived as different to the norm of non-disability, outside the realms of usual organizing processes and practices. By extension, it positioned the disabled academic as the marginalized 'Other'.

### **Moving from an individual to a social interpretation**

Some disabled academics appear to frame their experiences through both the individual and social interpretation discourses. When they become impaired, disabled academics may initially accept the individualized discourse of disability. However, over time, experience as a disabled person leads to a different awareness of the ways in which organizational practices and processes can include impairment effects related requirements. For example, **Abigail's** perspective changed over time and she focused upon expectations of her organization to manage changes to her work remit, rather than the individual and informal negotiations she had initially relied upon. **Sophia** reflected upon how at the time of becoming impaired she did not know what her employers could or should have done to support her remaining in employment and assumed responsibility for her organizing requirements. However, over time, requiring an inclusive response from employers began to frame her expectations.

In moving from an individual to a social interpretation discourse, disabled academics may have become more attuned to the dissonance and contradictions (Sunderland, 2007) between their organizations' discourses and practices (Deem et al., 2005), and the extent to which individual interpretation discourse permeates organizing processes. The shift in perspective from an individual to a social interpretation emphasizes the coexistence of contradictory discourses (Corker, 1998) offering "discursive space" (Weedon, 1997:107), and the potential for resistance against dominant discourses (Corker and French, 1999; Sunderland, 2004; Thomas and



Davies, 2005; Weedon, 1997). Disabled academics are able to name the individual interpretation discourse as infusing organizing processes and practices and through this discourse critique their organizing contexts (Sunderland, 2007). Through exclusion from the normative social order, a critique can also occur by engaging with alternative discourses (Weedon, 1997).

As Shah (2005: 23) suggests, the individual interpretation of disability remains “extremely significant to the lives of disabled people”, as it shapes expectations, perceptions of and responses towards disabled people. Disabled people, and here disabled academics, continue to be assessed against conceptions of ‘normality’ and against an organizing norm of assumed non-disability (Campbell, 2009; Chouinard, 1997; Harlan and Robert, 1998; Hearn and Parkin, 1993; Hughes, 1999, 2007; Morris, 1993; Shakespeare, 1994). Making assessments of disabled academics’ requirements with reference to the individual interpretation discourse can be reinforced through the legislative discourse, which follows.

### **Legislative discourse**

The legislative discourse is closely connected to both the individual and social interpretation discourses. The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 (and subsequent amendments) forms the basis of the legislative framework on disability in the UK. Disabled academics draw upon a legislative discourse in critiquing organizational processes and practices.

### **Legislative discourse as an enabling tool of critique**

Disabled academics themselves drew upon the legislative discourse when their requests for inclusive working arrangements or for changes to organizing practices were met with responses which indicated that their requests were perceived as unreasonable and/or as falling outside the protection of the legislative framework. Holly, Gina, Sophia, and Catherine variously talked of ‘adjustments’, which is a key concept within the legislative discourse. For example, Gina argued “one only wants the adjustments in order to be able to do the job”. **Catherine** critiqued her manager’s response to her request for a suitable chair and the misperception of fairness in relation to other non-disabled staff (‘well you know it has to be equitable and I can’t give you something that I can’t give another member of staff and I thought ‘oh, right. Interesting’).

Disabled academics seek to use the legislative framework, with its emphasis upon individual rights, equality and justice (Woodhams and Corby, 2007) to protect themselves and as a means of critiquing organizational processes or practices which marginalize or exclude their requirements. Disabled academics might reasonably expect employers and managers to acknowledge and accept the legislative discourse. Therefore, they draw upon the legislative discourse as leverage to let employers know they are aware of their legal rights (Roulstone et al., 2003). As Barnes (2000) suggests, the legislation, as understood through the social interpretation discourse, is intrinsically connected to the politicising impact of the disabled people’s movement and disability studies field, recognized as holding symbolic meaning of some importance in enhancing opportunities for disabled people (Roulstone and Warren, 2006).

However, drawing upon the legislative discourse can also reinforce disability and impairment effects related ways of organizing as the inversion of normality when assessing disabled academics as it is also argued to reify an individual interpretation of disability (Corker, 2000, Woodhams and Corby, 2003; Foster, 2007; French, 2001;

Roulstone 2003; Wells, 2003). This dominant understanding can cap employers' perception of their responsibilities, negatively affecting its interpretation and application (Woodhams and Corby, 2003).

Here it is argued disabled academics are using an inverse reading of the legislative discourse to critique organizing processes and practices which fail to include their requirements which would enable them to work effectively as people with impairments. As such, an inverse, reverse (Weedon, 1997) interpretation of the legislative discourse is argued to connect with the social interpretation discourse, and the desire to critique (Weedon, 1997) and refute the effects of the individual interpretation and legislative discourses when used to shore up normality as an organizing norm. The social interpretation and reverse interpretation of the legislative discourse name the normative order and support disabled academics' critique of organizing principles which exclude their requirements.

### **Legislative discourse as a source of constraint**

Whilst purportedly available as a means of critique of organizational practices of exclusion, Harlan and Robert (1998) and Foster (2007) draw attention to the potential for the legislative discourse to be used to maintain processes and practices that marginalize the requirements of disabled academics by finding them unreasonable. Further, the concept of reasonable adjustment itself may suggest to some that disabled people receive 'special treatment' (Harlan and Robert, 2006; Harlan and Robert, 1998). **Catherine** and **Gina** highlighted this negative concept when their requests, respectively for a particular chair and assistive technology, were considered unreasonable and refused. Although the legislation is open to equivocal interpretations, it would seem spurious to suggest that the chair Catherine required and the assistive technology Gina requested were unreasonable within the spirit of the law. Both Harlan and Robert (1998) and Foster (2007) interpret a lack of action or willingness to adjust work practices to meet disabled people's needs as reflecting employers' desire to keep such issues off organizational agendas. When used from an organizational perspective by managers, the legislative discourse can be used as a form of control to restrict or limit the ability of disabled academics to effect change to organizing processes and practices (Foster, 2007; Harlan and Robert, 1998).

Discourses construct particular versions of a topic which come to have truth effects, shape what is considered normal, and have implications for who can speak, about what, in different contexts (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Carabine, 2001; Simpson and Lewis, 2005, 2007). The individual interpretation and legislative discourses are resources (Kuhn, 2006) to make truth claims over what are recognized and accepted as legitimate ways of organizing within academic contexts. Reflecting the disability studies literature, these are more established, dominant, discourses which maintain a stronger hold upon what is considered normal (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Carabine, 2001; Simpson and Lewis, 2005, 2007). The individual interpretation and legislative discourses contribute to maintaining non-disability as the normative standard (Campbell, 2009; Chouinard, 1997; Hughes, 1999, 2007; Morris, 1993; Shakespeare, 1994) by positioning impairment effects related ways of organizing outside of organizational expectations and reifying an individual interpretation of disability (Corker, 2000, Woodhams and Corby, 2003; Foster, 2007; French, 2001; Roulstone 2003; Wells, 2003). Managers and other organizational members use these discourses as resources to regulate disabled academics' attempts to influence changes to marginalizing organizing processes and practices. This is reflected for example in the lack of concern expressed in response to **Samuel's** request for accessible room bookings for disability committee meetings.

## Discourses of resistance

So far we have argued that disabled academics can be understood to resist non-disability as an organizing principle and seek to legitimate their different organizing requirements by drawing upon the social interpretation and a reverse (Weedon, 1997) interpretation of the legislative discourse. In response, however, other organizational members can be understood to resist such resistances (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009), and it is in this contested space that a further “unmasking” (Simpson and Lewis, 2007:54) of normative assumptions can be achieved.

When seeking the legitimization of their impairment effect related requirements and organizing processes and practices, disabled academics conceptualize their position as one of resistance within their organizing contexts. **Jonathan** talked of having to “battle” over support to move equipment and “argue” over the provision of a suitable chair. **Gina** talks of being placed in an “adversarial” position in relation to her organization in response to the treatment she received.

This reflects an understanding of resistance as “a constant process of adaptation, subversion and re-inscription of dominant discourses” (Thomas and Davies, 2005:687). In resisting, disabled academics challenge and contest the transparency (Simpson and Lewis, 2005, 2007) of normative assumptions within their organizing contexts, which we argue in this research are premised upon non-disability (Campbell, 2009; Chouinard, 1997; Harlan and Robert, 1998; Hearn and Parkin, 1993; Hughes, 1999, 2007; Morris, 1993; Shakespeare, 1994). Disabled academics used the social interpretation and reverse reading of the legislative discourse as resistant (Thomas and Davies, 2005) and reverse discourses (Weedon, 1997) to challenge and resist the truth effects (Carabine, 2001; Hall, 2001) of the dominant individual interpretation and legislative discourses.

However, the individual and legislative discourses remained as the dominant discourses shaping meanings and interpretations. This is because resistances can be neutralized through counter-resistance (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009), that is “moves of resistance...evoke counter-moves that undermine, contradict and subvert them” (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009:1121). Thus, the disabled academics’ attempts to use the social interpretation discourse and reverse (Weedon, 1997) reading of the legislative discourse to refute disability related differences as negation were countered and contradicted by managers and other organizational members through their re-inscription of the dominant (Thomas and Davies, 2005) individual interpretation and legislative discourses. This prevented the disabled academics’ critiques from destabilizing normative standards premised upon non-disability and reduced the potential for disabled academics’ disability and impairment effects related inclusive practices to become acceptable norms within their organizing contexts (Simpson and Lewis, 2005, 2007).

Disabled academics’ resistance strategies can be interpreted as an attempt to codify (Deegan, 2000; Barnes and Mercer, 2005; Morris 1996, Thomas; 1999) as legitimate (Deegan, 2000; Gray, 2009; Harlan and Robert, 1998; Overboe, 1999) impairment effects related ways of organizing. Such attempts were sometimes ignored, rejected, or resisted. Corker and Shakespeare (2002) suggest complex social relations are an integral aspect of how disabled people negotiate the social world. Whilst disabled academics may be proactive (Corker and Shakespeare, 2002; Duberley et al., 2006) in seeking to shape their own futures (Shah, 2006), and their own working identities,

this is balanced by their social context and relationships with others who may accept or reject their aspirations. The centrality of manager-academics and other organizational members in contributing to the disabled academics' constructions of self have been highlighted by this study.

The disability studies lens, as a way of seeing and thinking (Deetz, 1992) about disability, further contributes to an appreciation of how organizing processes construct disabled academics' identities. The "actions, interactions and relationships" (Chia, 1995:585) or non-relationships with managers can be interpreted as gate-keeping (Becher and Trowler, 2001; King, 2001) responses. When organizing processes and practices do not meet their access and working requirements, disabled academics' requests for alternative arrangements are often refused. Whilst disability and impairment effects related different ways of organizing can be recognized as legitimate (Deegan, 2000; Gray, 2009; Harlan and Robert, 1998) without negation (Overboe, 1999) and responded to in an inclusive way, the experiences outlined in this paper suggest such differences were often perceived negatively. This reinforces the disabled academics' identity as different, and often as the "less acceptable, less respectable" (Ybema *et al.*, 2009: 307) 'Other' (de Beauvoir, 1972). As shown by the bold text in the findings, the 'negated difference' identity constructions (such as 'I'm viewed as trouble', **Samuel**; 'Everybody sees you as the moaner', **Gina**; 'everyone thinks you're really anti-social', **Holly**) were predominantly forced self-positionings by others. Deliberate self-positionings included strategic self-identity 'rhetorical assertions' (Kondo, 1990:307) of resistance (such 'I have had to assert my needs', **Jonathan**; 'you are forced into an adversarial position which is very uncomfortable', **Gina**); of defensiveness ('I have to be extremely careful', **Samuel**); or of ambivalence ('I'm probably quite alright with that', **Catherine**). Both types of discursive positionings support our argument that self-other differentiations relating to disabled and non-disabled people, embedded in societal and organizational discourses and enacted through local and mundane organizational practices, highlight the "antagonism, alienation and self-depreciation" Ybema *et al.*, (2009; 312) of disabled academics' identity work.

## Conclusion

The interpretations of disabled academics' experiences in this paper suggest that disability and impairment effects contribute to a "difference that makes a difference" (Mumby and Clair, 1997:189). That is they have consequences the social reality and identity of disabled academics in higher education academic contexts. These differences are not currently theorized within the extant organization studies and identity literatures. Theorizing disability and impairment effects as differences making a difference in the work experiences of disabled academics affirms Currie *et al.*'s (2000) suggestion that, whilst academia makes similar demands on all academics, some academics may be less able to meet the demands of how academic working practices are currently organized. At times, the disabled academics in this study struggled with normative expectations of academic work and the demands these placed upon them as disabled academics. At other times, the expectations conflicted with how they needed to work when seeking to incorporate impairment effects into organizing processes and practices.

Dominant discourses persuade people to "think and act" in particular ways (Simpson and Lewis, 2005:1261) and establish truth effects which construct particular versions of what is recognized as normative and legitimate in ways which invalidate alternative accounts. The paper has illustrated how the individual interpretation and legislative discourses create and maintain ableism as an organizing norm. The individual

interpretation emphasizes disability and impairment effects as a 'lack' on the part of the disabled academic and reproduces non-disability as normative. This emphasis upon disability and impairment effects related ways of organizing as other than normality is similarly reflected in the legislative discourse. Therefore, the dominant discourse of ableism challenges the legitimacy of disabled academics' impairment effects related organizing requirements and, by extension, has a regulatory effect on the legitimacy of their claims to be 'different' academics.

Disabled academics critique the organizing principles which contribute to the exclusion of their requirements by drawing upon the social interpretation discourse of disability and the reverse reading of the legislative discourse. Through "constant process[es] of adaptation, subversion and reinscription of [such] dominant discourses" (Thomas and Davies, 2005:687), the disabled academics attempt to resist marginalization and construct discursively their place and space for micro-emancipation by positioning their academic identities as legitimately different. The disabled academics' resistance 'names' the normative order of ableism and its regulatory effects. However, these discursive resistances are countered by other organizational members who, for instance, may draw again upon the individual interpretation of disability to refute and effectively neutralize the disabled academics' alternative claims. This is a testament to the strength of the individual interpretation discourse and suggests that a reverse reading of the legislative discourse has not penetrated organizing processes and practices. Whilst disabled academics' resistance may contest ableism, the counter-resistance responses and dominance of individual interpretation and legislative discourses maintain the privileging of non-disability as organizing principles and practices. Such privileging, therefore, excludes disability and impairment effects related way of organizing, marginalizes disabled academics and constructs disabled academics' identities as negated difference

The marginalizing of disabled academics and the construction of negated difference results in the assumption of a negative ontology (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2009) of disabled academics' identities. To transpose to this study O'Doherty and Willmott's (2009) consideration of the assumptions and implications of a negative ontology of capital-labour relations and the associated constructions of the 'worker' identity, the identity of 'disabled academic' is constituted negatively from its relation to other non-disabled academics. The key implication of this assumed negative ontology is that, although the dynamic and contested nature of identity construction processes are generally recognised, identity construction processes for the disabled academic are problematized and politicised through the ongoing need to engage in discursive political acts of resisting and reversing dominant discourses. These political acts were highlighted when disabled academics' requests for inclusive approaches to organizing led to others' responses to their requirements as difference, with negation. Disability and impairment effects related ways of organizing as difference need not equate to negation. In the disability studies literature, Overboe (1999) and Gray (2009) argue for the recognition, or social codification, of disability and impairment effects related different requirements to encourage, in response, inclusive organizing processes and practices.

Although there is understanding, within the disability studies literature, of how disabled people are "constructed as negatively different" (Chouinard, 1999:143) through the constituting effects of the discourse of ableism, that is non-disability, its regulatory effects are less well understood in the field of organization studies. Whilst we acknowledge the study's small sample, this paper makes an important contribution in enabling disabled academics to be researched in a way which raises their visibility empirically and theoretically. Addressing both the under-representation

and under-theorization of disabled people's experiences within organizing contexts, the theoretical contribution of this paper is two-fold. First, it has exposed the individual interpretation and legislative discourses which contribute to the construction and maintenance of ableism as a normative expectation of disabled academics in their organizing contexts, and challenged the perception of disability and impairment effects related ways of organizing as negated differences outside of normative expectations. Second, the effects of these exclusionary practices and dominant discourses have informed understanding of how people's identities are "caught up in processes of organizing" (Coupland and Brown, 2010, no pagination). The exclusionary practices, which surface when disability and impairment effects ways of organizing are contested by organizational members, and the dominant discourses re-affirm non-disability as normality. By indicating deviations from this norm, disabled academics' identities are constructed as the 'negated difference' Other, with the assumption of a negative ontology, and become the "effects of the exercise of power" (Alvesson, 2008:82).

This paper, in theorizing disability and identity, has surfaced negated difference as a central consideration. Within the paper we have drawn upon Overboe's (1999) argument for a theoretical lens which explores disability in relation to deference to an all encompassing naturalized and normalized ableist sensibility. We end the paper by suggesting further work is required to explore the potential of the concept of negative ontology, drawing on O'Doherty and Willmott's (2009:938) argument that engaging with negative ontology enables further insights into the meaning of identities as "contingent and dynamic as its meaning is constituted negatively from its relation to other identities" and may offer further insights into disability identities as contextually represented and constituted (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2009).

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